USCodex

From: Denis Brown [dsbrown#064#cyllene.uwa.edu.au%INTER2@hq.usda.gov]
Sent: Sunday, April 18, 1999 10:53 PM
To: USCodex@dchqexs1.hqnet.usda.gov
Subject: Attn: L. Robert Lake

Sensitivity: Personal

Dear Mr Lake,

I understand that you are the United States of America's representative to the CODEX meeting to be held soon in Canada. Even though I am not an American citizen, I am taking the time to write to you in the hope that you will read what I have to say and hopefully take notice of it.

Why? Because the United States exerts such a huge influence on the world in general, it has been said that "When America sneezes, the World catches cold." I believe that any decisions taken at the CODEX meeting will largely reflect America's position. For some time now I have been interested as a consumer and a lay scientist in the topic of Genetic Engineering. While my discipline is electronics and computing I none the less maintain a broad interest in general science, including nutrition and health.

It seems to me that there is a significant body of evidence to support the notion that genetically engineered foods do differ from those which "Mother Nature" would bring into being through cross pollination, mutation, selection and similar natural processes. In the course of Man's investigation into plants there has always been an element of experimentation including deliberate cross pollination in attempts to yield superior characteristics. The work of George Washington Carver springs to mind in the USA as does that of Farrer here in Australia, to name just two.

When we "force upon Nature" such creations as the classic fish-gene in the tomato and the Brazil-nut-gene splice into the soy bean many years ago, we overstep the mark. You will doubtless be aware of the adverse reactions suffered by those who ate pork meat, the pigs having eaten the engineered soy. The victims were allergic to certain factors within nuts -- so the effects of the engineering in fact survived digestion processes along the way! Adverse reactions were also experienced by ingesters of the tomatoes! And even were there no such reactions, would a vegan be pleased at knowing he'd eaten fish?

Those are real concerns -- they are tangible, provable, immediate. What of the long-term effects? I personally do not want to take the risk of having my children, and my grandchildren, adversely affected by such attempts to out-do nature, regardless of their "best intentions." Am I suggesting that these attempts be abandoned? Well, in the best of all worlds I think that would be in our best interests but as a pragmatist I fail to see that it will happen -- there is simply too much money invested for that to occur within my lifetime, I'm sure. Those responsible for the genetically engineered "improvments" naturally want everyone to believe in the benefits they hold. On the one hand they claim -- at least here in Australia -- "equivalence", that the product is 'indistinguishable" from the naturally occuring one. Yet on the other hand they promote the benefits of the new paradigm. Well, I'm sorry, but it seems to me they can't have it both ways. Either it's identical (in which case there's no room the genetically engineered material in the product) or it's not!

There are many specific areas of genetic engineering research which give me cause for concern, including the "improvement" of existing foods, the "treatment" of plants and animals to promote greater yield and / or resistance to disease and even the creation of 'naturally sterile" crop seeds which then force the farmers to purchase fresh stocks in order to continue their livelihood. Interestingly, many times the catch cry is that such engineering will be 'the only way" that we'll be able to feed our burgeoning world population. But at what cost? If third-world farmers cannot afford to buy next year's seeds, how are they going to be able to produce the food crops to provide that abundance of grain? If pest- and disease-resistant plant characteristics cross-pollinate with unwanted species (weeds, for example) will those undesirable species not also inherit the resistance traits and become unaffected by herbicides?

I read with increasing sadness the plight of the milk industry in America. Thankfully there's at least one lobby group which is now spreading news of the use of chemicals including genetically engineered hormones in the production process. Quite apart from the (inhumane) effects on the animals involved, the risk of major damage to the human species seems to me to be very real. In my day, milk was considered a staple -- we even had deliveries of milk sponsored by the government to our primary schools (you call them 'elementary schools" I believe.) I am hopeful that the Australian diary industry will be characteristically slow to catch hold of these ideas for their production but I fear that it will be sooner rather than later that we begin to see the introduction of genetically engineered chemicals in our herds.

So what am I suggesting -- what's the "bottom line?"

You have a very strong voice in persuading the labelling of genetically engineered foodstuffs.
Let the marketplace decide, by giving us the right to chose. Label the foods, please.

Without that benefit we cannot hope to make what we believe are healthy choices for ourselves and our loved ones. Thank you for your time to read this. I appreciate it.
Denis Brown

Note: The opinions expressed herein are entirely my own and in no way affect or reflect those of The University of Western Australia.

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